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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR(DICARLO), EUR/SCE(HOH/FOOKS); OSD FOR
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SUBJECT: BOSNIA - ENSURING A CHOD TRANSITION THAT KEEPS
DEFENSE REFORM ON TRACK AND BOSNIA ON THE PATH TO NATO

REF: SARAJEVO 479

Classified By: Ambassador Charles English. Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: We have been working for several months with NATO HQ Sarajevo, including Major General Wightman, to ensure that the July 21 transition from outgoing CHOD LTG Sifet Podzic (Bosniak) to a new CHOD is as smooth as possible (Reftel). The right leadership within the uniformed military is critical if for Bosnia to maintain momentum on its road to NATO membership, a core strategic objective of U.S. policy in Bosnia. The issue is complicated by Bosnia's Byzantine ethnic politics and the constraints imposed by its Law on Defense. In effect, a wholesale transition and rotation of the Bosnian Armed Forces general officer corps is required, not just the naming of a new CHOD. We and NATO thought we had forged a consensus among the key players, which include the Ministry of Defense and the Presidency, ensuring that the CHOD position would go to the most qualified general officer, one of two Serb generals. However, in early June Bosnian Serb member of the Presidency Nebojsa Radmanovic, for reasons that remain unclear, tabled an alternative proposal at odds with this goal. Between June 10-12 the Ambassador, MG Wightman, and PDHR Gregorian met with all three members of the Presidency to try and get things back on track. These exchanges, particularly Wightman's reference to the importance of NATO vetting to the selection process, appear to have persuaded Radmanovic to reverse course, but we will continue to engage the Presidency on this issue. END SUMMARY

Appointing a CHOD

¶2. (C) Under the 2005 Law on Defense, the four-year term of the current CHOD, LTG Podzic, expires on July 21, 2008. Podzic has been a strong supporter of defense reform and proponent of Bosnia's NATO aspirations, but cannot extend his mandate. We have stressed to Minister of Defense Cikotic and others involved in the decision-making process, including the Presidency, the importance of finding the best qualified candidate to replace him. We have also noted the importance of ethnic rotation in the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina's (AFBiH) top military commander (i.e., of appointing a non-Bosniak)(Reftel). Since the Law on Defense

prohibits one ethnic group from holding the top general officer commands, and the CHOD position will pass from a Bosniak to a Serb or a Croat, this means a wholesale transition and rotation of the entire general officer corps is necessary. Cikotic (Bosniak), and his two deputies, Igor Crnadak (Serb) and Marina Pendes (Croat), have struggled for months to develop transition options for the Presidency, which, as the collective Commander in Chief, has responsibility for making the final appointments. Cikotic, Crnadak, and Pendes met with the Presidency on May 28 to discuss the upcoming transition and rotation of general officers in the AFBiH.

Moving the Ethnic Chess Pieces

13. (C) Cikotic presented two options to the Presidency-- one a Joint Staff commanded by a Serb general, the other providing for a Croat general in the top slot. Cikotic did not attach any names to his proposal, but outlined the general officer rotation that would be required under each scenario to meet the ethnic background provisions under the Law on Defense. Cikotic requested the members of the Presidency to choose one of the two options before he suggested names for each post. Cikotic told us that his strong preference was for a Serb to take the CHOD slot, and that his favored candidate was the current Support Command Commander, MG Dragan Vukovic. Cikotic said that he would also support the appointment of current DCHOD, MG Mladin Milojcic, to the CHOD Position if that was the desire of the Presidency. Cikotic also confided that he has strong reservations about the abilities of the two potential Croat

candidates for CHOD. (Note: NATO HQ MG Wightman has made clear to Cikotic that Milojcic and Vukovic were by far the most qualified candidates for the CHOD position. Our Political-Military team shares NATO HQ's assessment. End Note)

Presidency Postpones Decision and a Serb Surprise

14. (C) Cikotic anticipated the Presidency would support the Serb CHOD option given concerns expressed by Bosnian Serb member of the Presidency Nebojsa Radmanovic about the lack of Serbs in leadership positions within state-level military and security structures. Instead, Radmanovic sent a letter to his colleagues, Presidents Haris Silajdzic (Bosniak) and Zeljko Komsic (Croat), stating that he supported the appointment of a Croat as CHOD. Radmanovic subsequently explained to Komsic and Cikotic that any decision between two highly competent officers, Vukovic and Milojcic, would be difficult, and he did not want to create problems for his political party in advance of the October local elections. His staff also indicated to us that Radmanovic wanted the Serbs to retain control of the Banja Luka-based Support Command. Radmanovic's shift threatened to derail a consensus we and NATO HQ had been seeking to shape on the general officer rotation that would have ensured the promotion of a general capable of meeting NATO standards while at the same time honoring the requirement for ethnic rotation.

Komsic and Silajdzic Back NATO Option

15. (C) With this in mind, General Wightman, Principal Deputy High Representative Gregorian and the Ambassador met with the three members of the Tri-Presidency separately June 10-12 to discuss the CHOD transition and advocate for a speedy resolution to the process, which ensured the Armed Forces continued to benefit from strong and apolitical leadership. (Note: Previously planned travel outside Sarajevo prevented Wightman from attending the Silajdzic meeting and Gregorian from attending the Radmanovic meeting. End Note) The three senior Americans in Bosnia stressed the importance of the CHOD decision to Bosnia's NATO aspirations and to the future of defense reform. They underscored that a strong, competent commander was critical to driving both processes forward.

Subtlety referring to NATO's role in vetting general officers, Wightman said that "two general officers stand out among the 13 in the AFBiH as the most qualified to serve as CHOD," stressing, "both are Serbs, Generals Milojcic and Vukovic."

16. (C) Komsic told us that he had been surprised by Radmanovic's position, and questioned the motivations for his last-minute shift. Komsic said that he personally supported either Vukovic or Milojcic taking over as CHOD, and had never insisted that a Croat take the top job. Recalling the break-up of the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA), Komsic said it was imperative that the Armed Forces be led by a strong commander who would not tolerate "parallelism and nationalism" in the ranks. Komsic conceded that Radmanovic's position put him in a difficult position, as he could not come out against the appointment of a Croat to the CHOD slot if the Serb Presidency member supported the move. Silajdzic also told us that he supported a Serb candidate for CHOD, underscoring that his interest was in doing what is best for Bosnia's NATO aspirations. He promised to work with Komsic to secure consensus within the Presidency for "the best qualified candidate."

Radmanovic Hints at Flexibility

17. (C) Radmanovic reassured us that he was committed to reaching an agreement on a new CHOD before Podzic's mandate expired, which he agreed, was critical to maintaining momentum on Bosnia's Intensified Dialogue and defense reform.

He stressed that he was not "trying to play games" or promote "any friends or acquaintances." Radmanovic also stressed that he was approaching the CHOD decision in his role as Commander-in-Chief, not as a member of the Alliance for Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), adding that his party had no position on the issue of who should be the next CHOD. Radmanovic acknowledged that he had suggested appointing someone other than Milojcic or Vukovic as CHOD, but his only interest was in promoting the best candidate. Looking at Wightman, Radmanovic noted that if NATO considered the two Serbs to be the most qualified that was important, adding that he "understood the significance of NATO vetting" in this process.

Comment

18. (C) Together with NATO, we have been working for several months to ensure the first-ever turnover within the Bosnian Armed Forces general officer corps this July is a smooth one and that decisions about it are as apolitical as possible. Our first challenge has been to beat back legal and political shenanigans by Podzic to retain his position, which would violate the Law on Defense (Reftel). Our aim now is to ensure a capable, professional general officer with a good understanding of NATO requirements replaces Podzic. We and NATO thought we had forged a consensus within MoD and at the Presidency in favor of either Milojcic or Vukovic. Radmanovic's about face on the issue -- he had been arguing for weeks that the new CHOD must be a Serb -- put this at risk. Radmanovic's response to the intervention of three senior Americans in Bosnia -- General Wightman, the Ambassador, and PDHR Gregorian (who is still remembered here as the architect of defense reform) -- suggests he is prepared to abandon his last minute proposal. We will remain engaged on this issue the outcome of which will have a critical impact on the U.S. and NATO agenda in Bosnia.

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